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# With a female vice president in office, has media gender-bias left the presidential campaign trail? The short answer is no, and the reason why is deep rooted.

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## Abstract

An examination of treatment in the media of female vice presidential candidates—Geraldine Ferraro (1984), Sarah Palin (2008) and Kamala Harris (2020)—surfaces a trend of gender bias perpetuated by subtly sexist language in all three campaigns. While society has made strides in equality in the 36 years between campaigns, the media treatment of Vice President Kamala Harris is not that far removed from the treatment of Geraldine Ferraro. The bias exists both overtly and subtly with obvious sexist language and more subtle forms of sexist language in coverage doled out by top media outlets, but subtle sexism is what often flies under the radar. Studies also show that media language surrounding candidates can have a pronounced effect on their electability. Much of the media bias can be traced to gender incongruency and the socially accepted norms of females and males and how those characteristics play into a candidate's ability to serve in a high-powered political position.


## Introduction

When I started my research, I thought I knew what I would find—that overt sexism in the media had given way to subtle sexism. Surely there was no way vice presidential candidates would be announced onto stage with their dress size or asked about their skills in the kitchen during a press conference. While societal changes have made this treatment taboo, it hasn't made the overall treatment of female candidates for executive office better.

To study the treatment of female candidates by media, I looked closely at three prominent elections of female vice presidential candidates on a major party ticket – Geraldine Ferraro, Sarah Palin, and Kamala Harris. The three campaigns represent the only three instances over 36 years during which a female candidate has run for vice president on a major party ticket. After an examination of coverage from prominent media publications in 1984-2021 and studies analyzing the language used to describe females, a trend of gender bias is evident. My overall conclusion now is that media treatment of female presidential and vice presidential candidates hasn't changed much since 1984, when the first female vice presidential candidate on a major party ticket was chosen. Some studies have even concluded the treatment has gotten worse with the addition of the 24-hour news cycle, increased media coverage and the introduction of social media.

Problematic coverage and trends uncovered include the very use of the term "first" to describe candidates, the sexualization of female candidates versus their male counterparts, the lack of using appropriate professional titles, gender framing and the content of coverage. All of these issues were present in all three elections. Perhaps most detrimental, however, is the gender-coded language used by media to discuss candidates. Not only are many decidedly female words, categorized as such in the Bem Sex Role Inventory, used to describe female candidates, but these words go against what it means to Americans to be a good leader.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle of all for female vice presidential and presidential candidates is appealing to the general public as feminine enough to be likeable while still possessing enough masculine qualities to be seen as fit for the job. The notions of "acceptable" female behaviors and characteristics are deep-rooted in most Americans but they are also perpetuated by media in

both the language used and the coverage provided. It is fair to say that much of the media's bias is subtle, and some of it is likely even unintentional. After all, these gender-coded words and ideas surrounding what is acceptable female behavior exist outside of politics, as well. When media, however, feeds into the bias, the effects can be detrimental.

Media coverage has a profound impact on profiling candidates and in some respects could even change the outcome of presidential elections. For many, media coverage of political candidates forms their opinion of the person running for office. "The media may contribute to, or even create public perceptions about candidates' strengths, weaknesses, and political viability. Such media perceptions may have a profound impact as well on the ability of candidates to raise funds and remain electorally viable," (Reeves, 2009). Media need to be aware that even seemingly harmless word choices can have a big impact on voter perception.

The Columbia Journalism Review boiled down the issue to this: "Media coverage of female politicians often uses sexist language, and tends to focus more on family roles, appearance, and perceived 'women's political issues' when covering female politicians. Women routinely face questions that male candidates nearly never encounter, like being asked to smile or to answer questions about work-life balance. Female politicians have been stereotyped in the media as 'ice queens' or 'grandmas,' and have been historically categorized into one of four roles: seductress, mother, pet, or battle-ax," (Garrett & Stecula, 2018).

*Media Coverage of Women in Politics: The Curious Case of Sarah Palin* broke down media gender bias in the reporting of high public office elections into five main categories: the amount of coverage for women is less than men; women face more stories than male candidates that focus on comparatively trivial subjects such as their physical appearance, lifestyle and family rather than their positions on prominent campaign issues; women tend to receive more negative coverage claiming that they lack the personality characteristics, experience and knowledge necessary for effective leadership in high public office; media coverage of female political candidates focuses on "woman's issues" such as abortion, childcare, education and the environment, rather than "men's issues," such as the economy, national security and military affairs; and questions raised about the influence a woman candidate would have should she be elected, (Wasburn & Wasburn, 2011, pp. 1-2). "These or similar patterns have been manifest in press coverage of political women since 1884," (Wasburn & Wasburn, 2011, pp. 2).

We are entering new territory with a female vice presidential candidate in office and we can hope this will propel the issue forward, but so far, the news isn't good. Harris has endured much of the same gender bias in the media as her predecessors Ferraro and Palin.

Within this analysis, I will answer these questions: How does media treat female political candidates differently than their male running mates  and has the media treatment of female vice presidential candidates become fairer since 1984? I also will explore the language media uses to perpetuate gender stereotypes and discredit female candidates.

## Literature Review

Sexism isn't always overt. Instead of yelling in your face, sexist media coverage can whisper, sinking doubt into the heads of voters without raising immediate alarm of criticism. Sexism can be subtle and, in some cases, even unintentional with biases so rooted in gender norms that it's easy for journalists to apply them to media coverage with or without mal intent. Regardless, subtle sexism is just as dangerous as overt sexism, if not more so because it's harder to spot, but

can be found in the nooks and crannies of media language. As a result, it perpetuates sexism and undercuts female political candidates and their ability to fill executive political offices.

A study conducted by the Northeastern School of Journalism analyzed the coverage from five major news outlets—the most read publications according to Amazon's Alexa app—The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Huffington Post, CNN and Fox News. The results showed disparities in the word choice used to describe candidates, male versus female. Overall, 1,397 articles were analyzed to determine media sentiment for each candidate, using articles over 500 words only from these publications and not sorted by topic or content. The result was as follows, highest (or best) to lowest (or worst): Booker, Buttigieg, Sanders, O'Rourke, Harris, Warren, Klobuchar and Gillibrand. It's easy to see that media sentiment was determined to be higher for all of the male candidates than any of the female candidates.

"Female candidates running for president are consistently being described in the media more negatively than their male counterparts," (Frandsen & Bajak, 2020). It begs the questions, what is causing the disparity? Could it be that female candidates are dealing with more scandals than their male counterparts or is it that the female candidates are facing more scrutiny than the male candidates? Furthermore, how detrimental is this coverage of female candidates to their political futures?

Inequal coverage of female versus male political candidates is nothing new. In 1991, *Women Candidates in the News: An Examination of Gender Differences in U.S. Senate Campaign Coverage* analyzed media coverage of senate candidates in the 1982-1986 elections. "The results of the study show that female candidates for the U.S. Senate are treated differently by the press. Female candidates receive less coverage and the news coverage they do receive concentrates more on their viability and less on their issue positions," (Kahn & Goldenburg, 1991, pp. 1). Not only does the media write about women as less viable candidates for political offices, but those writings also directly affect public opinion and how viable voters may find a candidate.

A large part of the problem is gendered media framing. Media framing can be defined as "that focus on how issues and other objects of interest are reported by news media as well as what is emphasized in such reporting," (Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw, 2004, pp. 257). "Language choice is a key component in establishing frames," (D. B. Carlin & K. L. Winfrey, 2009, pp. 328). Describing women using animal terms is one way the media belittles them. Whether a woman is foxy or catty, neither description helps the woman appear as a viable political candidate. In 1940 when Clare Booth Luce was elected to congress, she made it clear that using the term "catfight" while describing her disagreements with other women was an unfair portrayal. "Analysis of Senator Hillary Clinton's campaign for the Democrat nomination for president and Governor Sarah Palin's campaign for vice president reveals that media coverage incorporated gender stereotypes and gendered language that influenced the way both women were viewed," (D. B. Carlin & K. L. Winfrey, 2009, pp. 330). "Palin's attractiveness resulted in frequent and varied references to her 'sexiness'; whereas, Clinton was viewed as not feminine enough in pantsuits that covered her 'cankles' (thick ankles)," (D. B. Carlin & K. L. Winfrey, 2009, pp. 330). Media framing put both women into comfortable female categories of shrew and sex object respectively, used gender-coded language to undermine their authority and success and focused instead on their appearance and parental roles over policy, letting unflattering coverage overshadow their potential political prowess and acumen.

"Cameron (1992) argued that as a culture we have developed certain linguistic social recognitions of respect and status such as 'sir,' 'mister,' 'senator,' or 'doctor.' Women are often

stripped of this sort of recognition and respect when strangers, acquaintances, subordinates, or media commentators call them by their first names but don't do the same for males," (D. B. Carlin & K. L. Winfrey, 2009, pp. 329). An article published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found that male professionals were more likely to be referred to by their surnames than female professionals across disciplines, including science, math and politics. One example came from the constant use of Hillary during the 2008 election versus Obama, however, it is speculated that Hillary's own use of her first name may have perpetuated the media trend (Atir & Ferguson, 2018). According to the study, "Men and women were, on average across studies, more than twice as likely to describe a male (vs. female) professional by surname in domains, such as science, literature, and politics," (Atir & Ferguson, 2018, pp. 1). During the 2020 campaign, moderator Susan Page even apologized to Kamala Harris after forgetting to use her title of Senator. While Harris brushed it off, Page promised to deliver her the same respect as her male counterparts by using her appropriate title. The lack of professional or respectful titles for female political candidates, whether on accident or not, could affect their viability in the eyes of voters.

Meredith Conroy, author of *Masculinity, Media and the American Presidency*, speculates that the more scandalous backgrounds women are often portrayed to have are likely a result of how society views female behavior. "In a world where femininity is too often aligned with weakness or timidness, failure to conform to those stereotypes can result in differences in public perceptions," (Frandsen & Bajak, 2020). The societal norms don't just affect female political candidates, however. In *Women's Issue, Women's Place: Gender Related Problems in Presidential Campaigns*, Suzanne Daughton points out the criticism of Hillary Clinton and her position within her husband's 1992 campaign. The lawyer was part of her husband's political reign, and, notably not everyone took well to her stepping outside of the role they wanted her to fill as dutiful wife. Instead, Daughton wrote the "political wife" was glorified over the "career woman," (Daughton, 1994, pp. 112). "(The political wife) is praised for being an appropriate (which usually means silent) appendage to her husband's campaign. In 1992, Hillary Rodham Clinton was too much a participant for Republican tastes," (Daughton, 1994, pp. 112). In 1992, Marilyn Quayle said, "America loves Barbara Bush [applause] . . . because she exemplifies our ideal of a strong and generous woman dedicated to her husband, her children and her nation. She is a model for all generations—a woman I am proud to call a friend and our nation is proud to call First Lady," (1992, paragraph 14). Even Bill Clinton's praise of his wife during the campaign looped in her nurturing qualities, speaking of her work in education reform. Her successes in the space are easy to digest because they highlight the nurturing aspects of her personality, something Clinton has been criticized for failing to portray often enough as a female candidate (Daughton, 1994, pp. 112).

This brings in another harmful media frame, where female candidates are consistently described as mothers. It's not often you'll hear a male political candidate referred to as a father, and when you do, it's in a positive context. For female candidates, however, their role of mother is often challenged—can a mother be a good president/vice president if her duties at home with her children take precedence? When men run for political office it is assumed that a mother is at home taking care of the children, but the same assumptions are not granted in reverse. Instead, a woman with children—especially young children in Palin's case—is asked how she will juggle a blackberry and a breast pump, (D. B. Carlin & K. L. Winfrey, 2009, pp. 333-335).

With these gender perceptions at the forefront—and hidden inside of—just about every political speech, statement and media article, it's fair to believe that women are often jumping

extra hurdles in their campaigns to appear both feminine enough to appeal to the masses and masculine enough to do the job at hand—and do it better than the man/men they are running against. "Most presidential candidates are men and as it turns out, they define the role of president in exclusively, definitively masculine terms. In each presidential campaign, several candidates fervently audition for the role of Leading Man, and each must prove that he is 'a natural' for the part," (Daughton, 1994, pp. 114). To enact the perfect balance of feminine qualities while still creating a perception that is masculine enough to come off as fit for the job of president is a nearly-impossible balancing act, and again we see the inability to do so lead to the demise of a female political powerhouse: "Secretary Clinton's 'failure' to be 'appropriately feminine' not only has hindered her but has also made her the target of hatred for decades," stated Kelly Wilz in *Bernie Bros. and Women Cards: Rhetorics of Sexism, Misogny, and Constructed Masculinity in the 2016 Election*, (Wilz, 2016, pp. 357). "Male leaders can be tough and (appropriately) masculine. Female leaders can either be tough or (appropriately) feminine. Pulling off both at the same time is not impossible, but it is tricky terrain to navigate" (Sheeler & Anderson, 2013, pp. 358).

The societal consensus is that women are "supposed to" demonstrate particular behaviors and personality traits that make them feel pleasing and welcoming to the public versus ambitious and in-charge the way male candidates are often described. "In my work, we call this soft sexism," Conroy is quoted. "Coverage that talks about [candidates'] families or their personalities can reinforce perceptions of the viability of a candidate," she says, (Frandsen & Bajak, 2019, et al). That becomes problematic when the very traits associated with success and high political offices are determined inherently masculine. "Whenever women seek any space traditionally held by a man—and especially the office of the commander in chief—they tend to be pornified, degraded, diminished, and treated differently," (Wilz, 2016, pp. 357).

One way the discrepancy between male and female candidates can be verified, according to Wilz, is to google the politician's name with the word porn after it. Results for male candidates will be mostly benign, while for female candidates disturbing imagery and portrayals are aplenty for any high-powered female running for political office (i.e., Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, Nancy Pelosi or Sarah Palin). "Because women candidates perpetually combat the double bind between femininity and competence, media frames that cast them as sex objects undermine their credibility as leaders in ways that the same frames do not undercut male candidates," (Sheeler & Anderson, 2013, pp. 335-36).

Looking at specific media language, some of the negative terms that have garnered attention include "shrill" and "nasty," words reminiscent of the 2016 election involving Hillary Clinton. Valerie Sperling, a professor of political science at Clark University and an expert on gender politics, challenges readers and members of the media to consider whether or not the criticisms they are reading/writing provoke a double standard. "In other words, is the behavior bad because it doesn't conform to our political norms," Sperling says, "Or [is it] because the behavior is violating a gender norm, and therefore wouldn't be reported if the candidate were male?" (Frandsen & Bajak, 2019).

Analysis of media coverage hints to an underlying social-gender discrepancy at the root of the media's problems (and also likely heralded by the media's continued blunders in the treatment of female candidates). Heidi Moore, a media consultant, former *Wall Street Journal* reporter and former business editor of *The Guardian U.S.* was quoted, "There is a narrow universe of acceptable behavior for women," (Sullivan, 2019). Margaret Sullivan, a journalist for The Washington Post, said, "Women get bashed far more than their male counterparts for

personality quirks, vulnerabilities and actions of all sorts. Not to mention their appearance and speaking voices. Think of how far a female candidate would get if she came off like the rumpled and ranting Bernie Sanders," (Sullivan, 2019). "Female politicians are ridiculed for 'shouting,' not smiling enough, or simply having a masculine rhetorical speaking style," (Wilz, 2016, pp.357).

Sullivan points at the medias' portrayal of Clinton, including her "cackle" as Politico Ben Smith famously referred to her laugh in 2007, and her voice described as shrill. It wasn't only the focus on her marriage, clothes and emails that brought scrutiny to Hillary Clinton's ability to portray herself as a potentially successful political candidate but also the very words journalists used to describe her during the campaign that further made it difficult for the general public to warm to her. The problem is not that Clinton's laugh doesn't sound like a cackle—journalists like descriptive words and laugh sounds boring in contrast—but the fact that it's hard to imagine a journalist using the word "cackle" to describe the laugh of any male political candidate. That is an example of the very core of the problem we are addressing—the language used to describe female political candidates gives off negative connotations, in this case likening Clinton to a witch, both because the chosen feminine words are negative in nature and because they play into outdated gender norms that dictate how a woman should and shouldn't act, regardless of her place in business.

A study from the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy that looked at the media's treatment of candidates during the 2016 campaign, found that Clinton's coverage was heavy on criticism, light on policy and overwhelmingly negative in general. However, the study also concluded that the coverage of Trump had the same undertones, so while Clinton was marred by several scandals and some media language, it's possible that the coverage itself was equal if not fair for either candidate (or the general public of voters), (Shorenstein, 2017).

In the 1970s, Sandra Bem created the Bem Sex-Role Inventory to categorize descriptive language into masculine, feminine and neutral groupings based on how the general public perceives individual words. "When journalists write about women running for political office, they might, consciously or not, choose gender-coded words to describe these candidates, and these descriptors might in turn affect how the public views these candidates," (Garrett & Stecula, 2018).

A study published in the Columbia Review Journal titled *Subtle Sexism in Political Coverage Can Have a Real Impact on Candidates*, conducted by two graduate students challenged not only the language used by media to describe candidates, pointing to word choices that directly affect candidate likeability, but also the very thought processes and gender norms we have all learned throughout our lifetime. It spoke to subtle word choice and how it could impact the public's opinion of a political candidate and also found that university students reading an article about a male candidate with masculine words thought that candidate to be more equipped than the same candidate when they were described using feminine words and given a female name. Even with a female name, the candidate was seen as better qualified when the masculine coded words were used. "These effects might seem small, but they are substantively large, and might have serious implications for elections," (Garrett & Stecula, 2018). "Our results suggest that superficially harmless language choices can potentially change how the electorate views certain politicians. While more research on the subject is needed, journalists should be aware that even small, seemingly stylistic writing choices might have an impact on public opinion," (Garrett & Stecula, 2018). After conducting the study, Garrett said in

an interview, “It highlighted for me the difference between blatant sexism and this different subtle way of how we discuss female candidates and how we express these candidates to the world.”

The Bem Sex-Role Inventory created in 1973 is sometimes referenced when speaking of the gender-incongruency hypothesis and the masculine versus feminine language used by media to report on female versus male political candidates. Originally established to study androgyny and male versus female identity in individuals, the test is relevant when looking at the terms relegated as either masculine or feminine. A list of words connected to masculinity include self-reliant, forceful, analytical, dominant, ambitious and leader. Feminine categories include yielding, cheerful, shy, loyal, sympathetic, soft-spoken, tender and warm. A quick read of the collection of terms and categories associated with each gender is a good basis for understanding how female political candidates may be chastised by the media and, as a result, the general public, for displaying qualities that are more masculine because it challenges a norm we, as a society, feel comfortable with. It is also easy to see how the masculine terms serve positions of power such as the presidency and vice presidency while the categories associated with femininity and being female may not describe a solid political candidate holding one of the highest positions of power in the United States. In the discussion that follows I will refer to certain words as “female” based on the Bem Sex-Role Inventory. In addition, a 2010 Harvard study found that power-seeking women (or ambitious women) are regarded by the public with anger and contempt, while power-seeking men are not, (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010).

Times Up Now, an organization aimed at obtaining equity, power and safety for all (including women) focuses some of its efforts specifically on the media’s coverage of female candidates. The call to action page of the website states, “the news media plays a huge part in perpetuating sexist and racist tropes about the ambition, likeability, looks or attitude of women candidates across parties, especially women of color.” The website acts as a collection of information as well as sources to help others get involved in the fight by becoming informed, signing petitions and championing the efforts in their own lives.

This is not a purely male versus female issue. Media language affects the perceptions of women voters, too. Record numbers of women voted for Donald Trump, who wears his indecent encounters with women like a badge of honor and female voters have continued to support male candidates over female candidates in vice presidential elections. Even some of the women at the forefront of speaking up for gender equality in media coverage of politics have displayed petty and, perhaps unfair, remarks about the very female candidates they are working to defend (see Conway’s comments regarding Gillibrand’s inability to eat fried chicken and Rebecca Traister’s scathing review of Sarah Palin and her over-sexed, agreeable public image as a disgrace to the efforts to achieve gender equality in political campaigns).

In *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era*, female congressional campaigns are analyzed and it is concluded that sexism has been all but eradicated from those elections. Citing an increasing number of female candidates both running for office and holding office in Congress is a large part of what the authors concluded eradicated this gender bias and neutralized media coverage of politicians (Lawless, 2016, pp. 1-20). However, a separate study referenced in *Basic & Applied Social Psychology* notes that the same sentiments do not hold true for presidential offices. In *No Place for a Woman: Evidence for Gender Bias in Evaluations of Presidential Candidates*, authors state, “The gender-incongruency hypothesis predicts that gender bias is less likely in domains such as the Senate where women are relatively more prevalent. However, in the case of the presidency, the potential exists for

gender bias against women presidential candidates," (Smith, 2007). In short, in a space where a female has not yet proven to be able to handle the role of president or vice president (although we are in unchartered waters with the election of Harris as Vice President in 2020), the general public struggles to see it as a role able to be filled by a woman. And until we can imagine a woman as a successful vice president (or president) we will continue to place emphasis on the limitations put on female politicians.

While the presence of sexism in media coverage of female political candidates is hard to debate, there have also been recorded instances of female candidates and their camps calling out media and other politicians for sexism. While it is certainly not sexist to dislike or not vote for a female candidate, it is sexist to portray them based on outdated gender norms, to sexualize them, to cover their policies differently or not at all and to negatively impact their viability for reasons that relate directly to their gender.

**Geraldine Ferraro Campaign**

Geraldine Ferraro was the first female vice presidential candidate to run on a major party ticket, alongside Walter Mondale. The year was 1984 and, socially, the world was a very different place. Many saw Ferraro's run for office as a milestone accomplishment for women, but the media's treatment of her was different than the treatment her male counterparts received, a fact we can see clear as day in 2021, a year where equality is at the forefront of everyone's minds and media bias doesn't go unnoticed.

Media wasn't shy to admit that Ferraro was going to garner negative attention for her monumental nomination. Russell Baker, a writer for *The New York Time's Observer*, wrote in 1984 that, "For several days running, you couldn't turn on the set without hearing a TV political expert say that, as the first female vice-presidential candidate, she would be 'subjected to intense scrutiny,'" (Baker, 1984).

What Ferraro endured over the length of her campaign was both overt and subtle sexism. The conversations surrounding her gender were in-your-face and unapologetic. The very fact that she was a woman was a headline. She was openly attacked for her role as a mother, questioned at debates about her ability to command respect as a female in a political role (despite her success in doing so as a lawyer), held accountable for her husband's business dealings and attacked in an open-forum press conference by members of the media who did not try to hide that their questions came in large part because of Ferraro's gender.

"With the historic honor quickly came an inordinate amount of egregiously sexist mistreatment waged against her from fellow politicians and the media alike," (Arnold, 2020). Patricia Carbine, former publisher of *Ms.* magazine, told *The New York Times* in 1984, "She's carrying an extra burden… No other candidate's spouse has been scrutinized this way. They've asked other spouses about their charitable interests, their clothes, their hairstyles. Is there any more reason for John Zaccaro to have his business interests scrutinized than Lady Bird Johnson's?" (Dowd, 1984).

In her own memoir, Ferraro described the financial "scandal" that derailed her campaign process just two weeks after her position was announced. She had taken an exemption while in office that barred her from having to share her spouse's financial documents—an exemption more than 100 congress members had also taken advantage of while serving. But as a VP candidate, the media had questions, and Ferraro would be forced to share her husband's financial documents in 30 days' time. "Bam. Bam. Bam. Suddenly I was getting hit from all sides. And so was John," Ferraro wrote. "In one ten-day period spanning the end of July and the beginning of August, my ethics in having taken the spousal exemption would be publicly challenged, while John's own ethics in handling a court-appointed conservatorship of a widow's affairs were being questioned, and several of his real-estate transactions were being smeared with innuendo." Noting positive interactions with the people, Ferraro admitted her interactions with the press were "brutal." "Every time I faced the press, however, I was besieged with questions about our finances," (Ferraro, 2004, pp.159).

An interview with Barbara Walters was a pivotal moment in Ferraro's campaign, and one that helps us see the media bias between male and female political candidates. The interview included shaming Ferraro for being a working mother and questioning how much time she spent with her children. She was also asked why she used her maiden name, as if not taking her husband's last name professionally suggested scandal or somehow affected her ability to serve as a U.S. V.P. (Traister, 2011, pp.). Her husband, John Zaccaro came to her rescue, assuring Walters that Ferraro had only missed two weekends with her children due to her career aspirations.

While vice presidential and presidential candidate's spouses have faced scrutiny in many elections, aside from a large scandal, they are often overlooked. Ferraro, however, faced ongoing scrutiny through the lifetime of her bid for vice president in the 1984 election over business decisions made by her husband. In an article for *The Cut*, titled *What Was it Like to be the First Woman to Run for VP?*, the author wrote, "The excitement of Ferraro's nomination was soon overshadowed by allegations of financial wrongdoing against her husband, a wealthy property speculator, which ballooned into a major scandal," (Arnold, 2020).

An analysis of *The New York Time's* coverage of Ferraro's run for vice president written by Tracy Everbach turned up stories written by Maureen Dowd in which the female writer focused more on Ferraro being the first than Ferraro herself (a common theme at the time). She called Ferraro "as much symbol as candidate," and quoted a women as saying, "women do not belong in the White House," (Everbach, 2014, pp. 1). Joan Mondale, the spouse of her running mate, didn't help matters. She was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, "Oh, what do women talk about? She liked my new red dress. I was so surprised that she could still think in feminine terms. That's what's so wonderful! She's not jaded and sour and crabby," further cementing the sentiment that women are not commonly feminine and masculine and therefore cannot make good politicians (Dowd, 1984). Coverage that called her 'tough' had the potential to turn off women voters who felt threatened by her ability to thrive in a career outside of the home while still managing a household (Falk 2008). Also in Everbach's analysis, "A later piece by Dowd observed that Ferraro had to 'walk a fine line' between being tough but not being perceived as unfeminine," (Everbach, 2014, pp.1).

Other *New York Times* articles during the time period referred to Ferraro as "unpresidential," mentioned her habit of traveling with her children and even when the *New York Times* coverage of Ferraro was positive or defending, it acknowledged discrepancies happening around her, like the use of derogatory terms including "witch" used against her by the Bush

camp and defensive language assuring her ability to serve as a vice president despite her gender. The *New York Times*, overall, offered more favorable coverage of Ferraro (and has a reputation for backing liberal candidates), but it didn't ignore the gender stereotypes she was facing from other members of the media, politicians and the general public (Everbach, 2014, pp. 1-3). In her conclusion, Everbach noted gendered language within the *Time's* coverage and also noted misses such as incorrectly referring to Ferraro as Ms. Ferraro —another slip that could have affected public opinion about her ability to serve as VP and plays into the studies surrounding appropriate title usage by media in covering female candidates versus male candidates.

For Ferraro, being the first was a plague. She couldn't escape the term "first" in any of her coverage, which reiterated the idea that this wasn't normal, that a female vice president had never happened before. Even though it was factually accurate, the emphasis on the very word "first" threatened Ferraro's campaign and shot holes in the idea that she was fit to serve, because why is she fit if no woman has done it before?

The sexist treatment of Ferraro as a vice presidential candidate was apparent in the media, but political candidates also fueled the fire. George H. W. Bush once famously mansplained foreign policy to Ferraro during a debate, suggesting she didn't understand the concept. Ferraro was outspoken about how disrespectful the act was, and how much it offended her. During the debate she shot back with, "Let me just say that I almost resent, Vice-President Bush, your patronizing attitude that you have to teach me about foreign policy." And the bias that existed in those debates ran deep in politics. Ferraro recalls that her ability to pull the trigger, or more accurately push the button, to launch a nuclear attack was questioned simply because she was a woman. But while foreign policy seemed to be a space where men knew best, women's issues didn't earn her the same respect. "On the one hand, the perception was that men could speak with more authority than women on foreign affairs. Yet these same men also felt entitled to speak out just as forcefully on abortion. "Maddening as this bias was, it was there," (Ferraro, 2004, pp. 56).

Debates and press conferences created a perfect storm of media bias for Ferraro. In addition to asking questions that directly related to her femininity blockading her ability to be an effective VP—once at a debate someone asked Ferraro if she was worried Soviets would take advantage of her because she is a woman—an infamous press conference evaluated the treatment of Ferraro versus her male counterparts. Members of the press discussed on C-SPAN the media treatment of Ferraro, and specifically the treatment of her husband's finances. During the interview, a female journalist suggested the media coverage was justified when it looked at Ferraro's role in her husband's financial pursuits and well as a rumored connection to the mafia based partially on her Italian-American roots, (C-SPAN, 1984).

Aside from the overt sexism, the calling out of her femininity, the attacks on her ability to be a mother and a VP, the subtle sexism was there too, in the language media outlets used to describe the hopeful candidate. Anchor Tom Brokaw announced Ferraro at the Democratic National Convention by saying 'Geraldine Ferraro ... The first woman to be nominated for vice president... Size 6!'" "They'd note her frankness… feather-duster platinum hair, her figure," (Thulin, 2020). A review of Ferraro written by a female journalist for *Ms. Magazine* in 1984 described her as such:

*"She is the sort of pragmatic politician that the voting populace—and the men in the back rooms—could find most palatable: Attractive, but not beauty-pageant beautiful…A modern career woman, but one steeped in Old World values. Charismatic. Forceful, but not overbearing.*

*The best-prepared of a well-prepared lot. Loyal to the party. At ease in the old-boy network. She is, in essence, something of a fairy-tale candidate," (Caudle, 1984).*

The most telling words, however, about the level of sexism that existed in Ferraro's campaign are from Ferraro herself. The woman who lived the experiences and saw everything behind the scenes that the public did not was very aware that she was treated with bias for being a female. "What I wasn't prepared for was the depth of the fury, the bigotry, and the sexism my candidacy would unleash," (Ferraro, 2004, pp. 56). During a *Meet the Press* interview in 1984 she responded to questions regarding her candidacy and being chosen only for her gender with this quip, "I don't know if I were, if I were not a woman, if I would be judged in the same way on my candidacy, whether or not I'd be asked questions like, you know, are you strong enough to push the button. . . ." (Thulin, 2020) and eventually in 2008, in the light of Palin's run at VP, Ferraro came right out and said the media's treatment of her and her family were both sexist. "In 1984, I couldn't say, 'Stop it…Because I couldn't look like I was whining or upset about it," (Wingert, 2008).

Fast forward 24 years to 2008—that's how long it took for another female candidate to grace a major party ticket as a vice presidential nominee—Ferraro was heralded by many for opening the door to women in politics, perhaps finally garnering some of the positive media attention she deserved. Hillary Clinton, though she did not run for vice president, was the other major player in cracking the glass ceiling with her runs at the presidency in 2008 and 2016. When Ferraro died, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "She is seen correctly as paving the way for my political career and those of many other women. We owe her so much. She inspired us women and girls. All of us thought new thoughts and imagined new possibilities because of Gerry," (Clinton, 2011).

**Sarah Palin Campaign**

In 2008, social norms had shifted. Society often dictates what is normal and by 2008 working mothers, females as financial heads of household and women in politics were all more accepted into society. Sarah Palin was set up to have an easier go of a run at the U.S. vice presidency than her predecessor Ferraro, but to say that Palin was not treated by the media with a bias for being female would still be incorrect. In fact, Everbach concluded that Palin's treatment during the 2008 campaign was actually far more unbalanced than Ferraro based on her analysis of *The New York Time's* coverage of both campaigns. With other major news publications in the fold that conclusion stands to be argued but it does show that in 2008 a bias was still very much part of the media's treatment of its female vice presidential nominee (Everbach, 2014, pp. 1). "Comparison with mainstream media coverage of vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin 24 years later and of other candidates such as Hillary Clinton revealed that hegemonic masculinity in political coverage is firmly entrenched. In fact, Ferraro's treatment by the *Times* in 1984 was more gender-equitable than more recent media coverage of female political candidates in the 21st century," (Everbach, 2014, pp. 3). "…the news media continue to stereotype, personalize, trivialize, victimize and demonize female candidates. Masculine hegemony in politics still is the prevailing accepted reality (Everbach, 2014, pp. 22-23). Running in an era where media is on a 24-hour news cycle, Palin undoubtedly faced more coverage than Ferraro overall, and as a result, more negativity.

Culture and Media Institute, a conservative media watchdog group, described the coverage of Palin as "overwhelmingly negative." According to a study conducted by the Institute, the rate of negative stories to positive stories on ABC, CBS and NBC were 18:1 when it came to Palin. "If the polls are accurate, the networks have successfully created a caricature of Sarah Palin that ignores her all-American appeal, intelligence and accomplishments," Media Research Center President Brent Bozell said. "CMI's analysis shows an undeniable pattern of bias against her in a critical period before the election," (Bozell, 2008). Overall, the consensus was that coverage depicted Palin as unqualified and unintelligent, and mentioned several instances where media took the side of Obama in her disputes with him. During an interview with *Good Morning America* from 2008, Palin called out the gender bias as an "obvious double standard," adding "I mean, talk about my wardrobe and never talking about the male candidate's wardrobe. Or the questions posed to me of how I will be able to serve in office and still raise a family. I've never heard that asked of a male candidate," (Barr, 2008).

The very stigma of being the first again plagued the vice presidential nominee, much as it had for Ferraro. She wasn't the first woman to run for vice president, but there was still potential for her to be the first woman to actually serve as vice president. In that way, Palin suffered some of the same stigmas, being forced not only to present herself as a solid potential vice president but to also prove that women could in fact serve in the position.

Palin's portrayed image as a former beauty queen, a bimbo, a ditzy blonde, an aw-shucks type of woman, did not serve her well. While Ferraro worked to balance her feminine qualities with her no-nonsense attitude that earned her the title of "feisty," Palin was fighting against stigmas related to her youthful appearance, Miss Alaska title and media coverage that likened her to Barbie and Elle Woods (Dowd, 2008; Warner, 2008). Not to mention, Tina Fey's *Saturday Night Live* performances that played into the same dumb and busty stereotype the news media was running with.

In her book *Big Girls Don't Cry: The election that changed everything for American women*, Traister criticized Palin for representing everything men wanted in a female politician, which isn't a far cry from the same description Ferraro received at the beginning of her campaign (although Ferraro's came in the form of praise to be a palatable female candidate). After all, the decision to bring Palin onto the McCain ticket was made by three men, and the women behind the scenes said they were not consulted on the matter (Traister, 2011, pp. 224). "Palin was simultaneously seductive and seditious, the kind of woman who spoke on behalf of other women but appeared not to like them very much," (Traister, 2011, pp. 229) "The kind of woman who, as Jessica Grose of *Jezebel* eloquently noted, gained her power by doing everything modern women had believed they did not have to do: presenting herself as maternal and sexual, sucking up to men, evincing an aw-shucks lack of native ambition. She met with such adulation because her posture reinforced antiquated gender norms," (Traister, 2011, pp. 230).

While Traister's criticisms of Palin attack her pleasant feminine qualities, Palin's character plays exactly into what the gender-incongruency suggests. The public seems to have a hard time matching a feminine candidate with masculine qualities that align themselves with leadership, so by playing up the very characteristics that connected her to femininity, was Palin actually making a potentially more successful run at earning the vice presidency? After all, if the media is going to attack female candidates for being "too ambitious," then by conforming to gender norms, Palin may have been appealing to a larger audience. "What Palin so beguilingly represented… was a form of female power that was utterly digestible to those who had no intellectual or political use for actual women: feminism without the feminists," (Traister, 2011,

pp. 236). Palin was attacked for the very shortcomings that media have attached to female candidacy in the past, such as a lack of knowledge on foreign policy, a dedication to motherhood and her family and a personality that did not evoke confidence in her leadership skills. She appeared, as Traister points out in a roundabout way, too feminine for the job.

A piece on the opinion pages of *The New York Times* titled *Poor Sarah* didn't do the vice presidential candidate any favors. While the writer likened herself to Palin, she also connected her to Elle Woods, the ditzy blonde who goes from sorority to Harvard on self-confidence and a prayer played by Reese Witherspoon in 2001. The narrative gave Palin some grace, but also took another dig at her ability to serve as vice president or president, (Warner, 2008).

Despite decades of social progress, Palin still faced a barrage of media bias related to her gender. "Most of the attacks on Palin wound up being personal, sudsy and slightly delusional (Traister, 2011, pp. 231). The very language used by the media to define Palin was problematic. Ed Schulz, a radio host, used the word "bimbo" to describe Palin and later asked Larry King and Republican Susan Molinari, "What kind of mother is she? Is she prepared to be the vice president? Is she going to be totally focused on the issue?" Sally Quinn of *The Washington Post* also raised questions about Palin's ability to complete her duties, adding "her first priority has to be her children. When the phone rings at three in the morning and one of her children is really sick what choice will she make? (Traister, 2011, pp. 234). "No one would be asking these questions if she were a man. No one asked whether Arnold Schwarzenegger should run for governor because he has four children… This is how the double standard works," Susan Estrich, a lawyer and feminist writer, remarked," (Traister, 2011, pp. 234).

The mother issue was not a new one. Despite decades of progress toward gender equality, Palin still faced criticism for wanting to be president while she had young children at home. Palin, to top it off, had an infant with special needs, which led many reporters to ask if a vice presidency was too much to take on while caring for a young child that may need more time and attention than most (D. B. Carlin & K. L. Winfrey, 2009, pp. 332-334). In a CNN interview, Sally Quinn, a. female reporter for *The Washington Post*, questioned just this:

*"... everyone knows that women and men are different and that moms and dads are different and that women—the burden of child care almost always falls on the woman ... . when you have five children, one a 4-month-old Down syndrome baby, and a daughter who is 17 ... and who is going to need her mother very much in the next few months and years with her own baby coming, I don't see how you cannot make your family your first priority. And I think if you are going to be president of the United States, which she may well be, I think that's going to be a real stretch for her." (Quinn, 2008, para. 47)*

So far removed from the campaign of Mondale and Ferraro, the focus on Palin's look, the sexualization of her from the media, was as discouraging as ever. "Sexist portrayals of Palin stemmed from her beauty queen background, her youthful appearance, wardrobe, and her unabashed feminine nonverbal communication such as winking," (D. B. Carlin & K. L. Winfrey, 2009, pp. 330). Her past in beauty pageants became a common theme in coverage, again focusing on her achievement through her appearance as opposed to her accomplishments as Governor of Alaska. Even a former contestant, Miss America Kate Shindle, who competed with Palin played into the narrative, and *The Post* published the quote, describing Palin's ''cheerful aggressiveness'' as ''part cheerleader, part news anchor and part drill sergeant'' (Copeland, 2008). It seemed the media was painting this picture of an attractive and ditzy woman vying for

political office, a former beauty queen with a large family and teen pregnancy scandal courtesy of her daughter. While interviews—including an infamous ABC interview with Charles Gibson—poked at her lack of knowledge of national security and foreign affairs, other news outlets were focused on her successes that not only didn't pertain to the job she was applying for but also placed doubts about her viability so that even "positive" coverage was damaging to her campaign. It was printed in the *Berkeley Daily Planet* that Palin was an "essentially inexperienced ex-beauty queen" a heartbeat away from the presidency and that "The race for the U.S. presidency is not just one more beauty contest," (O'Malley, 2008). "Candidates are disadvantaged in making their case to voters when they are ignored by the press. Trivialization has the same consequence," (Wasburn & Wasburn, 2011, pp. 2). Perhaps one of the reasons that Everbach was able to conclude the coverage for Ferraro was fairer than the coverage of Palin is because the publication took to referring to Palin as 'Barbie,' again a reference to her youthful looks that discredited her as a respected candidate for vice president (Dowd, 2008). In *The Daily News*, her looks again were the focus. "Former beauty pageant contestant Palin is a head-turner who offers ample opportunities for trouble to a man who expresses appreciation for attractive women in ways that overstep the bounds of political correctness,'' (McAuliff, 2008). A marketed blow-up doll of Palin also undercut her experience while treating her as a sex object. "The objectification of Palin went so far as creation of a blow-up doll 'complete with bursting cleavage and sexy business suit' that included instructions to 'blow her up and show her how you are going to vote,'" (D. B. Carlin & K. L. Winfrey, 2009, pp. 330).

Analysis of Newsweek and Time conclude that the majority of Palin's coverage by the media outlets focused on childhood, family, physical appearance and personality (58.2% in Newsweek and 52.3% in Time). By contrast, only 11.9% and 14.3% respectively concerned her qualifications for office, (Wasburn & Wasburn, 2011, pp. 5). By contrast, the Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden received less coverage from these two outlets but more than half focused on his qualifications and policies and none focused on trivial aspects of his life, (Wasburn & Wasburn, 2011, pp. 5).

Again it is the remarks from Palin that show a first-hand account of how media gender bias was felt during a vice presidential campaign. "In an interview with a rightwing documentary film-maker, Palin attacks local and national newspapers, TV network news, anonymous bloggers and stand-up comics for presenting a distorted image of herself, her family and her Alaskan administration." "Palin said she became the victim of 'absurd' gossip. Blogs were rife with the rumour that she was not the mother of her infant child Trig, born four months before her nomination - rumours that she said persisted today." She attacked media back—"'It's a sad state of affairs if the mainstream media is going to rely on anonymous bloggers as the source of their information. Very scary,' she said." (Pilkington, 2009 et al).

**Kamala Harris Campaign**

Harris started her campaign for vice presidency in late 2020, after President Joe Biden announced her as his running mate, but this was hardly her first foray into the media's eye. She gained public attention while campaigning for president during the 2020 election and had received media attention while working as the California Attorney General before that. Harris' coverage, however, of course blew up when she became a household name in 2020. She was not only one of several women running for president, but she was also Black and Asian, representing

a type of candidate America had never seen on a major party ticket before. Despite running during a year of racial and sexist awakening, when conversations surrounding equality were at an all-time high, Harris still faced a barrage of sexist media language and framing as both a female candidate and a BIPOC candidate. An article published in U.S. News entitled *A Historic Day, a Familiar Refrain,* likened the treatment of Harris to Ferraro. **"**And while the tropes and snide remarks about Harris aren't as direct as the but-can-she-cook sexism Ferraro experienced, Harris is being hit with a slew of attacks directed not at her qualifications or skills, but at her personality and identity," (Milligan, 2020).

Amber Phillips, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, wasted no time in addressing the pink elephant in the room. "Sen. Kamala D. Harris (D-Calif.) is certain to face sexism during this campaign. And based on what we know from research about women in politics, it will manifest in some subtle and not-so-subtle ways — from her opponents, yes, but also from voters who may not realize the gender-specific expectations they put on female candidates," (Phillips, 2020). Phillips' noted how liked Harris was would be of importance. "Research from the nonpartisan group Barbara Lee Family Foundation, which advocates for women in politics, shows that women have to prove they're likable before they receive a person's vote. By contrast, voters will cast a ballot for a man they agree with but don't necessarily like," (Phillips, 2020). Phillips also addressed the appropriate level of toughness a woman must display in order to be taken seriously but not viewed negatively, an intense need to prove her qualifications due in large part to the underrepresentation of women in executive offices and the need for a confident demeanor that does not evoke feelings of arrogance. Essentially, Harris would need to walk a fine line between being feminine and masculine while operating under a microscope that is unforgiving to a woman of color. There will be "basically no room for mistakes," Amanda Hunter of the Barbara Lee Family Foundation said, "for both female politicians, but especially women of color, who have to work harder than anyone else to show their qualifications." Hunter also said, "If she appears too tough, then she could jeopardize her likability, and that's a nonnegotiable for women," (Phillips, 2020).

After the announcement that Harris would be on Biden's ticket, Time's Up Now reported that 25% of Harris' coverage was either racist or sexist in nature. This includes the use of both sexually coded and racially coded words that referred to Harris as "uncooperative" and "ambitious." Tina Tchen, president of Time's Up Now said, "[The report] demonstrates with numbers how normal we think it is for white men to run for these offices and how unusual or subject to criticism we think it is for a woman of color to run for those offices," (Morin, 2020). By letting Harris' race and gender dominate her political coverage even when it wasn't done so negatively but rather as factual statements about her status, again, as "the first," Morin concluded that media was no longer talking about her qualifications and that takes away from her ability to campaign. The Time's Up Now study analyzed two weeks of coverage after Harris was announced as Biden's running mate and found that 61% noted her gender and/or race, 36% focused on her ancestry and only 31% of coverage focused on her professional qualifications and achievements. During their vice presidential campaigns, 5% of Mike Pence and Tim Kaine's coverage mentioned gender or race and less than 5% of coverage mentioned either candidate's ancestry or personal life. The adjectives used to describe Harris—nasty, extreme, phony and mean—were also a stark contrast from the portrayal of being "safe" and "experienced" that both Pence and Kaine received, (Times Up Now, 2020).

The media's treatment of Harris not only took away from headlines that could have focused on her' qualifications, her professional achievements and her electability, it also fed into

a long-running stereotype of the "angry Black woman." President Donald Trump fueled the fire, as well. Trump called Harris "nasty," a "mad woman," and "so angry." And while Trump isn't the media, Fox News printed what he said and that plays into a dangerously sexist and racist stereotype and discredits Harris as a potential VP. He also suggested Harris may not have been born in this country, which is entirely false. "If it's said at a press conference, it, of course, ends up in the press. So, the problem spreads quickly and becomes a focal point, even if the media is decrying the idea," (Conrad, 2020). Much like Palin, Harris was being given a caricature by the media that she would have to attempt to burst out of if she wanted to find success in her campaign.

While Harris' campaign featured multi-faceted, problematic coverage that encompassed her race (which nods to some of the coverage Ferraro received for her Italian-American heritage at the time that sparked rumors about ties to the Mafia), the sexist coverage was still there. Like many female candidates before her, salacious gossip and claims about her romantic relationships that sexualized Harris were also made. Media personality Tomi Lahren accused Harris of "sleeping her way to the top," which not only sexualizes her as a woman, but also demeans her accomplishments and threatens her viability in the eyes of voters. A quick search on the internet will turn up first page results calling Harris a prostitute and undermining her business dealings, letting them be overshadowed by a high-profile relationship Harris herself has referred to as "an albatross around my neck" (Roy, 2020). The first time *The San Francisco Chronicle* ever wrote about Harris it was as Brown's "new steady," (Roy, 2020). Later in the publication, she was dubbed "attractive, intelligent and charming," in an article detailing her split from Brown (Roy, 2020). The first time Harris was even covered in local media it was to highlight her womanly attributes, her character and her looks as opposed to her rising star in California politics. "One pernicious line of attack on Harris is as old as misogyny itself. It claims that a woman who has served as San Francisco district attorney, California attorney general and U.S. senator slept her way into those positions," (Tumulty, Woodsome & Pacanha, 2020). Not only is the coverage demeaning, but it focuses on scandal, proving the very claims that there is a narrow range of acceptable behavior allotted to women and that is why their media coverage includes a higher instance of scandal than their male counterparts.

Media intelligence platform Zignal Labs found negative tweets were being shared about Harris at a rate of 3,000 tweets per hour, following the running mate announcement, (Tumulty, Woodsome & Pacanha, 2020). The same analysis found the sexualized hashtag #heelsupharris appeared 35,479 times in Twitter posts in the week following the announcement, (Tumulty, Woodsome & Pacanha, 2020). An Aug. 12 Facebook post made by Steve Baldwin, former California State Assembly member, and shared more than 630,000 times, brought up the same tired news about Harris' relationship with former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown. An excerpt: "Willie launched her career because she was having sex with him. The idea that she is an 'independent' woman who worked her way up the political ladder because she worked hard is baloney. She slept her way into powerful jobs," (Tumulty, Woodsome & Pacanha, 2020). Other quotes followed suit from conservative media figures including Rush Limbaugh stating, "Willie Brown, the former speaker of California Assembly, former mayor of San Francisco ... has been very open about the fact that the affair they had is what boosted her up," and Florida Representative Matt Gaetz's statement that, "Kamala Harris moved up in California politics because she was dating Willie Brown," (Tumulty, Woodsome & Pacanha, 2020).

The attention surrounding her bid for vice presidency was nothing new for Harris. In the week after Harris announced her presidential campaign, she received more Twitter attention than

Biden, Sanders, Buttigieg, Warren or Klobuchar, according to a study reported by Lucina Di Meco, Global Fellow at The Wilson Center. “More social media attention on a candidate was not necessarily a positive. The study concluded that social media narratives around female candidates were more negative and focused on issues of character and identity, rather than electability or policy,” (Haynes, 2019). It was during this timeframe that Harris was called out for not being “authentically American” due to her parents’ immigrant status, already an immediate attack on her electability. In the analysis of all six candidates, the three females were dominated by mentions of their character, while all three male candidates were discussed based on their electability. “The study also showed that female candidates received more attacks from right-wing and fake-news accounts, yet also received less traditional news media coverage compared to their male counterparts,” (Haynes, 2019).

Even before Harris was announced as President Biden’s running mate, allies in the Biden camp discouraged a Harris nomination based largely on one characteristic: she was too ambitious, (Schwartz, 2020). A CNBC report referenced several anonymous sources who declared top financial backers of Biden’s campaign were against a Harris nomination based partially her ambition. “The story led to widespread complaints on social media that women are faulted for a trait — ambition — that men are expected to have and indeed are frequently praised for,” (Bernstein, 2020). Ambitious is, of course, coded on the Bem Sex Role Index as a “male” characteristic.

After Harris accomplished what had never been done before, the sexist treatment didn’t stop. Many media outlets doled out coverage that was “vapid, patronizing, and painfully cliché,” (Pierre, 2020). Headlines included a U.K. Telegraph article that read *Why Kamala Harris is the Modern Day Beauty Icon the World Needs*, a stark contrast to the same outlet’s coverage of Vice President Pence’s win that read, *Mike Pence: Donald Trump’s VP will soon be second most important man in Washington*. “Male politicians are perceived in line with traditionally masculine qualities such as intellectualism or wit, as opposed to outer appearances,” (Pierre, 2020).

Reporting on a woman’s looks, even a female politician, hasn’t evolved much either. Hillary’s pantsuits and kitten heels and Palin’s wardrobegate (backlash over the price of her fancy clothes) are just two examples. Even male politicians aren’t immune—several articles questioned whether or not President Obama had killed the necktie while a media outlet once mused whether or not Mike Pence has had Botox. So, we shouldn’t be surprised that President Harris’ choice of footwear made headlines or her purple power suit at the inauguration was front page news. But the day after such a historic event in American history does not seem the time or place to discuss Harris’ fashions when we could be talking about her achievement. “By running features which focus on Harris’ appearance, the media portrays women as being little more than ‘pretty props’ in politics, giving rise to sexualization,” (Pierre, 2020). Harris, however, seems to have taken a page from Michelle Obama’s book, using the unnecessary coverage of her wardrobe and other trivial details to her advantage. Much like Michelle Obama started wearing black-owned labels that promoted sustainability to turn fashion coverage into a political statement, Harris chose to don Converse and Timberlands, in a move some analysts suggested was done to make her appear more approachable to younger voters and to create a connection to her culture.

Despite the barrage of negativity that surrounded much of Vice President Harris’ campaigns for both president and vice president, the woman came out on top. Plagued much like

Palin and Ferraro by the very term "first," whether it was the first female to run for vice president, the potential to be the first vice president or the actual very first vice president herself, Harris has effectively proved herself worthy of the position no female has held before. And while it is clear that the sexist media treatment of female politicians for executive office will not disappear overnight (if the last 37 years are any indication), one nag on the next female vice presidential candidate will be erased forever. As Harris said herself during her first speech as vice president elect, "I may be the first, but I won't be the last," (Harris, 2020).

## Conclusion

Despite 37 years of history, the sexist and misogynistic treatment of female politicians for executive office by members of the media has not been met with the leaps and bounds of progress one would expect when looking at the U.S. as a whole. While citizens are working tirelessly to provoke change and instill laws and values to create an equal America based on both gender and race, women running for vice president (and other political positions of power) are still faced with both subtle and overt sexism. To add insult to injury, not only has the treatment of female vice presidential candidates pretty much flatlined with little progress made over nearly four decades, but an increase in news coverage, the introduction of the 24-hour news cycle and the addition of social media, has led to increased sexist coverage of female politicians. While change is necessary in the world as a whole, in order to progress as an industry, members of the media need to face their own media biases and make a conscious effort to undo the harmful stereotypes that fuel much candidate coverage and ultimately affects the electability of female candidates and the future of politics as a whole.

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